The Arctic: Northern Aboriginal peoples

CANADA'S NORTH IS FIRST AND FOREMOST THE homeland of Aboriginal peoples who have inhabited this vast region for thousands of years – long before explorers, settlers, and fortune seekers made their way into the region.[1] Notwithstanding their cultural, ethnographic and linguistic diversity, northern Aboriginal peoples share a deep and abiding connection to the land and continue to rely on local resources for their physical and spiritual well-being. Over the past century, they have experienced the socially disruptive effects of disease, federal relocation programs and centralization, and are now facing the implications of resource development and climate change.

In the past four decades, the political achievements of Aboriginal peoples, through their land and self-government agreements, have significantly transformed the way in which the North is governed. In many respects, Aboriginal peoples living in northern Canada enjoy considerable political and institutional autonomy in comparison with their southern counterparts. For Aboriginal communities, this is a time of opportunity and of enormous challenge. Although the majority of land claims and self-government agreements have been concluded, the economic and social conditions experienced by northern Aboriginal peoples continue to represent some of Canada's most pressing domestic issues.

Profile of the northern Aboriginal population

Unlike in the south, Aboriginal peoples comprise a substantial portion of the northern population (see Figure 1), often outnumbering non-Aboriginal people or forming an influential plurality of voters. According to the 2006 census, the Inuit population in Canada numbers approximately 50,485. The majority of Inuit live in one of four regions known collectively as Inuit Nunaat, the Inuktitut expression for "Inuit homeland": Nunavut, Nunavik (in northern Quebec), Nunatsiavut (in Labrador) and Inuvialuit (in the Northwest Territories). Inuit comprise roughly 85% of the population of the territory of Nunavut and also represent the majority populations in Nunavik and Nunatsiavut (see Table 1).

Figure 1: Population distribution in the Canadian Arctic regions

Source: Adapted from "Canada, Arctic indigenous population," UNEP/GRID–Arendal Maps and Graphics Library, 2004, http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/canada-arctic-indigenous-population (accessed 17 June 2008).

Table 1: Aboriginal population of northern Canada

	First Nations	Inuit	Métis	Total (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal)
Nunavut	100	24,640	130	29,325
NWT	12,640	4,165	3,585	41,055
Yukon	6,280	255	800	30,195
Nunavik	45	9,565	15	10,570
Nunatsiavut	0	2,160	35	2,410

Adapted from Statistics Canada, 2006 Census.

In 2006, the Aboriginal population of the Northwest Territories numbered 20,635, representing half of the territory's population (50.2%).[2] Of that number, 61% self-identified as North American Indian, 20% as Inuit and 17% as Métis. In Yukon, approximately 26% of the population is Aboriginal. There are 14 First Nations in the territory, speaking eight different languages. However, the majority of Yukon First Nations peoples belong to one of the Athapaskan and Tlingit language families.[3]

The demographic, economic and social conditions of northern Aboriginal peoples are notably different from those of the Canadian population and other northerners. The most striking demographic feature of northern Aboriginal peoples is their rapidly growing and youthful populations. For example, while the median age for the Canadian population as a whole is 38.8 years, the median age of the Inuit population is 22 years.[4] The Inuit population has the highest proportion of young people among Aboriginal groups: In Nunavik, for example, 56.8% of the Inuit population is under the age of 25, and 85.6% is less than 45 years of age.[5]

Population projections released by Statistics Canada suggest that Aboriginal people aged 20–29 will account for 40% of the young adult population in Yukon and 58% of young adults in the Northwest Territories over the next decade. In Nunavut, more than 80% of the population is aged between 20 and 29 years, and this age group as a proportion of the total population is expected to continue to increase.[6]

The youthful structure of the northern Aboriginal population has significant policy implications and will likely set the stage for important challenges in the near future. Territorial and Aboriginal governments acknowledge that they must find ways to create meaningful employment opportunities, increase education and income levels, and assist young Aboriginal northerners as they make the transition from school to wage and traditional economies. The young Aboriginal population is also likely to increase demand for such services as housing, which are already overburdened and in short supply.

Aboriginal peoples in the North also face considerable social and economic challenges and tend to fare worse on a range of social and economic indicators in comparison with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In 2007 the Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic reported a high incidence of social problems, such as unemployment, alcohol abuse, family violence and sexual abuse, in the North.[7] Poor conditions are often attributed to the disruption of Aboriginal peoples' traditional economies and the loss of control over traditional lands and resources.[8]

Generally, Aboriginal peoples have higher mortality and suicide rates, as well as lower education and income levels, than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. According to the Inuit Tapiriit Kamatami, the suicide rate among Inuit is 11 times the national average,[9] and life expectancy is about 15 years lower than among Canadians overall.[10] Inuit households are also more likely to be overcrowded, 20% falling below the crowding standard established by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Limited employment opportunities and low rates of educational attainment are also key issues for the Inuit. In Nunavik, 68% of the Aboriginal population does not have a high school leaving certificate.[11]

Statistics from the 2001 census indicated an unemployment rate among the Aboriginal population of Yukon that was more than double the territorial average (26.8% versus 11.6%) and a median household income of $39,614 for Aboriginal people as compared to $51,930 for all Yukoners.[12] Rates of university graduation for the Aboriginal population

of the Northwest Territories are sharply lower than for the territory as a whole, and less than one quarter of the Aboriginal population (24%) has a high school leaving certificate.[15]

The changing political landscape

Since the mid-1970s, northern Aboriginal peoples have made important strides in re-establishing autonomy over their traditional lands and resources through the settlement of comprehensive land claims agreements.[16] Today, a majority of Aboriginal people in the North are signatories to comprehensive land claims and self-government agreements.[17] These agreements have significantly enhanced Aboriginal peoples' influence over land, wildlife and resource decisions, and have established new governance and land management regimes in the North. The creation of the territory of Nunavut in 1999 as set out in the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* (1993) is perhaps the most dramatic example of the North's new reality.[18] For many Aboriginal peoples, comprehensive land claims agreements are seen as a critical first step in decolonizing the North. By establishing Aboriginal control over lands and resources, comprehensive land claims have fundamentally reconfigured the political landscape of the North.

Settled comprehensive land claims agreements in the North

Northern Quebec

- James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975)
- Northeastern Quebec Agreement (1978)
- Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement (2007)

Northwest Territories[17]

- Inuvialuit Agreement (1984)
- Gwich'in Agreement (1992)
- Sahtu Dene and Métis Agreement (1994)
- Tlicho Agreement (2005)

Nunavut

- Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (1993)

Newfoundland and Labrador

- Labrador Inuit Agreement (2005)

Yukon

Eleven of the 14 Yukon First Nations have settled land claims agreements,[18] as well as separate self-government agreements, as provided for in the Umbrella Final Agreement:[19]

- Champagne and Aishihik First Nations (1995)
- First Nation of the Nacho Nyak Dun (1995)
- Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation (1995)
- Teslin Tlingit Council (1995)
- Selkirk First Nation (1997)
- Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation (1997)
- Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in (formerly Dawson First Nation) (1998)
- Ta'an Kwäch'än Council (2002)
- Kluane First Nation (2003)
- Kwanlin Dün First Nation (2005)
- Carcross/Tagish First Nation (2006)

Comprehensive land claims agreements are constitutionally protected documents that define a wide range of rights and benefits.[20] The vast majority of settled comprehensive land claims are in the northern regions of Canada.[21] Benefits include ownership of lands in the settlement region, cash payments, exclusive rights to wildlife harvesting, and participation in land, water, wildlife and environmental management in the settlement area. By virtue of these agreements, Aboriginal governments in the territories are now key players in local and regional economies and play an integral role in territorial politics.[22]

The economic integration provided by land claims agreements results in part from the establishment of joint land use and resource boards. These boards have been fundamental in ensuring that Aboriginal peoples share decision-making authority and responsibility in environmental and natural resource matters. However, this system of sharing decision-making responsibilities among federal, territorial and Aboriginal governments has also given rise to layered regulatory processes. To deal with the challenges of realizing cooperation among various levels of government and handling the proliferation of responsibilities, in November 2007 the Government of Canada launched the Northern Regulatory Improvement Initiative to examine the current regulatory regimes in the North and make recommendations to improve them.[23] The initiative's report, entitled *Road to Improvement*, was released on 17 July 2008 and makes 22 recommendations on restructuring and improving the regulatory systems in the North to facilitate the "responsible development of resources."[24]

Aboriginal peoples and the northern economy

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples observed that the most important challenge for the future of northern Aboriginal peoples is economic.[25] Unique challenges hinder economic development in the North. These include limited infrastructure, high transportation costs, remoteness from primary markets and small populations with limited formal education or industrial skills. This is especially true for Aboriginal communities, which tend to be small and widely dispersed, and in many cases accessible only by air or seasonal sea and river transport. As a result, the traditional or subsistence economy continues to be a vital part of the livelihood of Aboriginal peoples, particularly those in the circumpolar North. Today, Aboriginal peoples' participation in the economy can be characterized as a mix of traditional activities (hunting, fishing, trapping) and wage employment. Wage employment in the North is provided, generally, by three sectors:

- direct employment in government and in government support services;
- small businesses, mainly in the service sector, including tourism; and
- mining (e.g., diamonds, oil and gas development, gold, silver, lead, zinc).

The economic contribution of traditional harvesting activities (i.e., hunting, fishing and trapping) is often poorly captured in official statistics. The emphasis is often on the market or public sector economies, such that the "traditional sector" is overlooked despite its importance to Aboriginal communities, especially those in isolated areas. Statistics Canada, for example, estimates that roughly $40 million dollars of country (traditional) food is produced annually by Inuit.[26]

Although it is difficult to quantify precisely the value of the traditional economy in monetary terms, there are tangible quality-of-life benefits, as well as the benefits of nutritious food, cultural heritage and some economic returns. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami observes that, for Inuit living in the northern territories, supporting greater access to country foods and participation in the traditional economy takes on greater significance when one considers that by far the greatest share of personal debt is linked to the purchase of food.[27] As a result, some Inuit are unable to buy the basic dietary requirements of life. In such cases, families obtain essential dietary staples through strong ties to the land and access to country food.

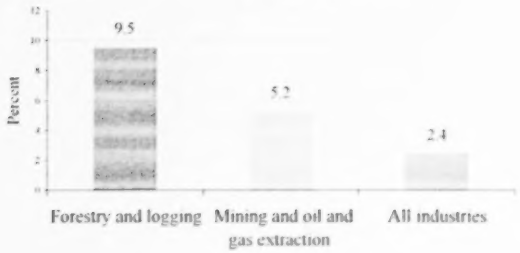
The settlement of land claims in the North has also played an important role in supporting the economic well-being of Aboriginal peoples.[28] Research suggests that communities that have successfully negotiated access to and jurisdiction over lands and resources enjoy greater economic benefits than communities that have not concluded land claims agreements. Land and cash transfers to

Aboriginal people resulting from the settlement of land claims are important economic drivers of the northern economy.

Apart from securing jurisdiction over a defined land and resource base, land claims agreements generally contain a variety of economic development provisions, such as resource revenue-sharing arrangements and impact benefit agreements. Impact benefit agreements are designed to secure community employment and commercial benefits from mining developments in the traditional territories of Aboriginal peoples. As a result of land claims agreements, and the access to investment capital they provide, there are growing numbers of Aboriginal businesses in the North, including airlines, commercial fisheries, tourism, transportation and mining companies.

Increasingly, Aboriginal peoples are also becoming key players in resource development activities in the North (see Figure 2). In a period of robust economic growth, resource development activities such as diamond mining and oil and gas exploration have the potential to generate significant employment opportunities for Aboriginal communities and Northerners.

Figure 2: Aboriginal share of the Canadian labour force by sector, 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2001.

Natural Resources Canada estimates that approximately 1,200 Aboriginal communities are located within 200 km of mineral and metals activities and that one third of these communities are located less than 50 km from one of the primary mines developed in Canada.[29] In addition, federal control over resource development is diminishing with the transfer of lands and resource management to territorial governments through devolution agreements that may directly or indirectly include Aboriginal groups.[30]

Aboriginal participation in the resource-based economy, however, has not always been the norm. In the 1970s, Aboriginal peoples strongly opposed the development of a pipeline along the Mackenzie Valley to move Canadian Arctic gas to southern markets. They voiced their concerns to Thomas Berger, then Commissioner of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. The inquiry was established by Parliament in 1974 to investigate the social, environmental and economic impact of the proposed pipeline that would run through Yukon and the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories.[31] Berger agreed with the Aboriginal groups. He observed that, because land claims in the north remained unsettled, Aboriginal people would be adversely affected by development, having no say in how development would take place on their lands or any meaningful ability to benefit from that development. As a result of Berger's recommendations, a 10-year moratorium on oil and gas development in the North was put in place by the federal government.

Thirty years after Berger released his report, with the majority of land claims settled and the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights secured, Aboriginal leaders are far more optimistic about the benefits that resource development can bring to their communities. Far from being passive observers, Aboriginal people are now in a much better position to participate in decision-making processes with respect to large-scale development and share in the resource revenues from development on their traditional lands. Having once opposed pipeline development, Aboriginal peoples are now one of the principal partners in the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline project. In 2000, Aboriginal leaders from all regions of the Northwest Territories formed the Aboriginal Pipeline Group (APG) to maximize benefits from the proposed pipeline. Importantly, the APG will be able to acquire up to a one-third interest in the pipeline. This represents the first time that Aboriginal groups will participate in large-scale resource development as owners.[32] Similarly, in Yukon, the 14 First Nations have united to form the Alaska Highway Aboriginal Pipeline Coalition to advance First Nations' interests with respect to a possible Alaska Highway gas pipeline project.[33]

Many Aboriginal communities, however, face the prospect of large-scale resource development with a mixture of optimism and apprehension. The capacity

to take advantage of resource development opportunities is a key challenge for northern Aboriginal communities with low literacy rates and comparatively poor education levels. In 2001 a report of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy made a number of recommendations with the aim of ensuring that non-renewable resource development will result in a sustainable future for northern Aboriginal communities.[34] One of the report's key recommendations was to provide adequate support for skills and learning development to enable Aboriginal peoples to enjoy real and lasting benefits from the exploitation of non-renewable resources.

Although there is hope that resource development will bring tangible benefits to northern Aboriginal communities, there are also deep concerns about the adverse effects it may have on the environment and on traditional cultures and value systems. The clash of large-scale developments – and the employment and economic benefits they can bring – with the preservation of traditional economies can be divisive and difficult to resolve. Today, however, these conflicts are better managed through the structures of co-management, corporate development and self-government created by the region's comprehensive land claims settlements.

Climate change challenges

It is generally accepted that climate change will have greater consequences for the North than for other regions in Canada, and that northern Aboriginal communities are likely to be most affected because of their close connection to the land and their limited resources to adapt to changing conditions.[35] The traditional livelihoods of northern Aboriginal communities, which depend heavily on natural resources, are directly threatened by melting ice shields and permafrost.

Many northern Aboriginal peoples continue to rely on the traditional economy for self-sufficiency. However, as temperatures rise in the Arctic, the ability to procure country foods becomes more difficult, and food security is threatened. Recognizing that environmental stewardship is vital to the overall health and viability of the northern economy,[36] northern Aboriginal leaders, such as Mary Simon, President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, have called on the federal government to assist Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples in adapting to the effects of global warming in Canada's arctic region.[37]

Conclusion

During the past two or three generations, northern Aboriginal peoples have experienced fundamental changes to their way of life. In response, they have struggled to have their rights recognized and are successfully regaining control over their lands and resources. Today, most Aboriginal groups in the North have settled their land claims. In so doing, they have irrevocably changed the northern political landscape. Meeting the pressing economic and social needs of Aboriginal communities, in particular young Aboriginal northerners, while respecting the principles of sustainable development, environmental protection and the evolution of new governance structures, will continue to be key challenges for northerners and their governments.

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24 October 2008

SOURCES

1. For the purposes of this paper, the Canadian Arctic or North refers to the three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut), the Nunatsiavut region of Labrador and Nunavik in northern Quebec.
2. Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, "Aboriginal People – 2006 Census," News release, NWT Bureau of Statistics, Yellowknife, 15 January 2008, http://www.stats.gov.nt.ca/Statinfo/Census/census%2006/Aboriginal%20Peoples_2006.pdf.
3. Additional information on the Yukon First Nations can be found at the Council of First Nations of Yukon website at http://www.cyfn.ca/.
4. According to Statistics Canada, the median age is the point where exactly one half of the population is older and the other half is younger.
5. Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census*, Ottawa, 15 January 2008, Cat. No. 97-558-XIE, http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=97-558-XIE2006001 (accessed 20 August 2008).
6. Ibid.
7. Birger Poppel et al., *SLiCA [Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic] Results*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, Anchorage, 2007, http://www.chaireconditionautochtone.fss.ulaval.ca/en/PDF/SLICA_Int%20results_March%2007.pdf.
8. For a discussion of gender issues among northern Aboriginal peoples, particularly Inuit, in the context of social change, see Clara Morgan, *The Arctic: Gender issues*, PRB 08-09E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 24 October 2008.
9. Suicide rates for Inuit may vary according to sources consulted.
10. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *Inuit Statistical Profile*, Ottawa, August 2007, http://www.itk.ca/Inuit-Statistical-Profile.

11. In Canada, 63% of Inuit between 20 and 24 years do not have a high school leaving certificate as compared to 16% of Canadians.

12. Yukon Bureau of Statistics, "Profile of Yukon Aboriginals (Census 2001)," Information Sheet 5.01.03, August 2003, http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/stats/social.html (accessed 21 August 2008).

13. Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *Strategic Investments in Northern Economic Development: Discussion Paper*, Ottawa, August 2004.

14. "Comprehensive land claims agreements" are based on the assertion of continuing Aboriginal rights to land in those areas of Canada where treaties were not signed, while "specific claims" arise from the alleged non-fulfillment of an historic treaty or the improper management of Indian lands and assets.

15. Since first announcing its claims policy in 1973, the Government of Canada has signed and ratified 21 comprehensive claims agreements. The agreements cover roughly 40% of Canada's land mass, including parts of Yukon, the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Quebec, Labrador and all of Nunavut.

16. The establishment of Nunavut as a distinct territory under its own public government fulfills a long-held aspiration of the eastern and central Arctic Inuit to control their destiny.

17. Negotiations with the Akaitcho, the Northwest Territories Métis Nation, and the Dehcho are ongoing.

18. The White River First Nation, Liard First Nation, and Ross River Dene Council have not reached final and self-government agreements.

19. The Umbrella Final Agreement, signed in 1993, is a common template within which each of the 14 Yukon First Nations negotiate final agreements. See http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/agr/umb/index_e.html.

20. Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* "recognizes and affirms" Aboriginal and treaty rights that now exist or that may be acquired by way of land claims agreements. By the terms of the Act, Aboriginal rights apply to Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada and "are guaranteed equally to male and female persons."

21. For a detailed description of each claim, including land and cash compensation, see Comprehensive Claims Branch, Claims and Indian Government Sector, Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *General Briefing Note on the Comprehensive Land Claims Policy of Canada and the Status of Claims*, Ottawa, March 2007, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/clm/glbn/glbn_e.pdf.

22. The full and effective implementation of comprehensive land claims agreements has been an issue of concern to the Aboriginal signatories of those agreements. In 2003, Aboriginal groups with settled land claims agreements established the Land Claims Agreements Coalition to press the federal government for improved implementation policies and practices. In May 2008, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples released a detailed report examining the ongoing challenges of modern treaty implementation. This report, entitled *Honouring the Spirit of Modern Treaties: Closing the Loopholes*, is available at http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/abor-e/rep-e/rep06may08-e.pdf.

23. The Northern Regulatory Improvement Initiative included the appointment of Neil A. McCrank, Q.C., P.Eng., by the Honourable Chuck Strahl, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, as the Minister's Special Representative. See Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, "Minister Strahl announces initiative and appointment to improve the northern regulatory system," News release Yellowknife, 7 November 2007, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/s-d2007/2-2955-eng.asp.

24. Neil McCrank, *Road to Improvement: The Review of the Regulatory Systems Across the North*, Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2008, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/m-a2008/ri08-eng.pdf.

25. Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "The North," Chap. 6 in *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Vol. 4, *Perspectives and Realities*, 1996, pp. 387–497, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sj1_e.html#Perspectives%20and%20Realities.

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27. It is estimated that households in Nunavik dedicate 44% of their total budget to purchasing food. See, for example, Government of Quebec, *Orientations and Perspectives for Actions to Fight Poverty*, Nunavik Consultation, Inukjuak, Que., 17 January 2002, http://www.katutjiniq.ca/en/pdf/Poverty%20Study%20English.pdf.

28. On this point see James C. Saku and Robert M. Bone, "Looking for Solutions in the Canadian North: modern treaties as a new strategy," *The Canadian Geographer*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2000, pp. 259–70.

29. Additional information on mining activities and Aboriginal communities is available through the Natural Resources Canada website at http://www.nrcan-rncan.gc.ca/mms/prod-serv/pubscomp_e.htm#bulletin.

30. For example, chapter 23 of the 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement provides that Yukon First Nations may collect 50% of the Yukon government's share of resource royalties up to a cap of $2 million, following which the First Nation share is 10%. Devolution negotiations between the Government of Canada and the territorial government of the Northwest Territories are ongoing. Negotiations with the Government of Nunavut have not yet commenced.

31. Thomas R. Berger, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, Vol. 1, Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, Ottawa, 1977, pp. 1–2.

32. For additional information, see CBC News, "Indepth: The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline FAQs," updated 12 March 2007, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/mackenzievalley_pipeline/faqs.html.

33. Additional information is available on the Alaska Highway Aboriginal Pipeline Coalition website at http://www.ahapc.ca/about.aspx.

34. National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, *Aboriginal Communities and Non-renewable Resource Development*, Ottawa, 2001, http://www.nrtee-trnee.ca/eng/publications/aboriginal-communities/index-aboriginal-communities-eng.htm.

35. For a discussion of environmental issues in the Arctic, see François Côté and Tim Williams, *The Arctic: Environmental Issues*, PRB 08-04E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 21 October 2008.

36. For a more detailed description of the consequences of climate change on the health and well-being of northern and Aboriginal communities, see Natural Resources Canada, *From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate*, Chapter 3, Part 5, Ottawa, 2007, http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/assess/2007/ch3/5_e.php.

37. A significant victory in the fight against persistent organic pollutants (POPs) was achieved in 2000 when a United Nations treaty was finalized in which 122 countries agreed to phase out POPs. Canadian Aboriginal groups through the Canadian Arctic Indigenous Peoples Against POPs helped to lead the effort that produced the international treaty.

Ce document est également publié en français.